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SPEAKERS

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Good evening, everyone and welcome. Can you hear me okay? Now hold on. Okay. So I'm in the middle of teaching a two week retreat, which we do every year. I teach at Hidden Villa. So it's close by there during the day, people who were there are there all day long. They stay there. And they're engaged in a long silent meditation retreat. And the theme of the retreat, the basis for the instructions for this retreat is a particular discourse that the Buddha gave, called the Pali it's called the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on breathing mindfully. And in this the heart of this text is his instructions for how to meditate with Breath, your breathing at the center of the meditation, focusing on breathing. It seems that whatever references we have, from the ancient texts of what kind of meditation practice the Buddha himself did, it seems that the primary references that he practiced mindfulness of breathing, there's a incident where he went off into the woods by himself to go meditate for a couple of months. And as he was leaving, he said to his disciples, He said, If anybody asks what I'm doing, you can tell them I'm practicing mindfulness of breathing. And then we have this. And in this discourse, where he praises the value of mindfulness of breathing greatly, he says, if you if you follow this, mindful, breathing all the way in deeply, you'll fulfill the four foundations of mindfulness. You'll cultivate the seven factors of awakening, and you'll come to awakening yourself. So as a beautiful kind of way of phrasing it, the importance of it. Outside of this particular discourse, there is not that much instructions of how to practice mindfulness of breathing. And in fact, in this discourse, the instructions are pretty brief, seemingly following an in an Indian tradition of just kind of giving a very brief brief outline of some, some important teaching with the idea, at least in India is that someone, the teacher is supposed to fill in the details. And so there's not a lot of detail. And so what it means is that different teachers have interpreted these, this dis outline for the practice in a little different ways. But it's a beautiful outline for a meditation practice. And I wanted to kind of go through some of the points of it that I think maybe is useful. So the focus is on meditating on the breath and breathing. And, and it's all the time focusing on the breathing. And in doing and having the breath at the center of attention, developing both concentration and mindfulness. Many people in our scene who develop mindfulness practice are often begin with breathing, but sometimes are very quick to let go. The focus and the breathing in favor of what sometimes is called Open awareness, that you're just here in the present moment and you're just aware of what's happening as things are going on and you're very presence noticing it. It's a beautiful way of practicing. Those sometimes open awareness practice doesn't lend itself very well to getting very concentrated. It also doesn't lend sometimes it lends itself to the idea that which is supposed to do when you meditate. It's just sit there and be very accepting of everything. Which you kind of are supposed to, but if you're just just a matter of accepting everything, you know, why meditate? You know, just sit there and mean that's part of the problem is people sometimes accepting their mind too much already. And just going along with it, you know, just you know, and I was expecting it just fine until I until I was told to meditate.

The so in the anapanasati, and this this course on mindful breathing, the breathing is kept at the center all the time. So it works. Breath meditation works as a, as a focus of concentration, and also used as a basis for developing insight or mindfulness, the two primary purposes of Buddhist meditation. But in the process of the 16 stages, or 16 steps that this this text describes. It kind of guides a person through a deepening, deepening aspects of meditation practice. Where your psychophysical state is changed, changed in the process. And in fact, the idea here is that they're supposed to be, you're supposed to enter into kind of kind of a meditative state or meditative kind of way of being. In other words, you're not supposed to just kind of, and your meditation feeling exactly the same as you did when you started. You know, again, why bother. But rather, it's supposed to be a kind of a transformation, a change, nothing else more relaxed. So there's 16 different steps to the practice. And these steps alternate, little bit between steps that involve just being present for something just the way it is just recognizing it being present. And other steps which involve changing your experience of doing something about it. And so sometimes you do one and sometimes you do anything. The first thing you do in this practice is you sit down, establish some modicum of attention in the present moment. And then you focus on knowing or understanding, knowing what your experience or breathing is like. So that does a few things as soon as the breathing is always in the present moment. And so if you're trying to stay with the breath in the present moment, you have to let go of a lot of distraction is to let go of a lot of scattered nests of mind, and start focusing yourself here in the present moment. So the simple act of getting to know your breath as it occur in the present moment, is a focusing practice. And so, a big part of what people have to do when they start meditating is learning to somehow not stay caught up in their thoughts. And it's one of the software's sometimes it's one of the hardest things to get across to some meditators. That meditation is not what you think. Meaning a variety of things. But one of the things that means is that meditation is not is not a practice of thinking discursively about your experience. And a lot of people are very wet, so wedded to the discursive thinking, the kind of thinking that's making commentary discussing what's going on making stories of what's happening, assigning meaning to what's happening, interpreting what's happening, kind of that whole level of kind of somewhat abstract, ongoing, kind of what's called discursive, conversational thinking in the mind. Some people are so embedded in this kind of thinking, they don't even know they're doing it. It's just like a fish doesn't see the water, they swim, and they say, and so everything's mediated through their thinking this way. That of course, meditation should be the same thing as some I'm just very hard to step out of it to see there's another way even people who realize this another way it can be very hard, because of the momentum of habit to think discursively is so strong you know, many people have spent a lifetime giving unfettered permission to their discursive mind to wonder this way and that way and think what it wants without any bound bounds on it without any instruction to do differently. Even if you do you know, sometimes you give instruction sometimes you focus your mind discipline your mind for certain activities, but you know, I, you know, majority of great majority of the time, we're pretty passive.

And just letting our mind do whatever it wants, doing, letting our attention just follow the byways and pathways of what our thinking mind in our jumping mind or scattered mind kind of picks up and goes down. After windows and you know associated thinking and one moment you think the one thing at the moment you think something else you might just follows along and you. And so in that kind of freedom, a certain habit of being certain kind of passivity about the mind is operating, we give free rein to your mind. with mindfulness with meditation practice, you stop giving free rein to your discursive thinking mind. So your attention is free rein to let your mind direct where your attention goes, you begin to take some ownership or responsibility of your own attention. So in the beginning of meditation practice, it's not a passive use of your attention, but an active use. If this distinction makes sense, usually, we're passive attention just as there goes along for the ride and we pay attention kind of whatever, you know, the mind thinks we should pay attention to. But here we are. Choosing to be active With our attention, and not let it just kind of be yanked around. And, and what the activity is, is to begin becoming familiar

with what the experience of breath is. I think it's significant that in this instruction, it just says, know your breathing. Note know the qualities, the characteristics of your breath. It doesn't say judge it. It doesn't say change. It doesn't say judge yourself doesn't say interpreted or anything with it. Just know it. It can seem so simple, that the mind can protest and say, you know, this is ridiculous. The breath I mean, I've important things to do. And figure out and fantasize about and plan and remember, and there's really important things my life depends on it. And this breath, I mean, they talk about something boring. There's no monetary value. And so it can be hard for the mind to want to Let go of all its concerns and really focus on the breathing. And it's a big training to do it. So it's good that the training begins with by doing something very simple, there's no judgments. Just just know it, just be with it. So you come back and deal with it, get to know it, get to know it, stay with it. And for some people, it's very liberating right away, to realize you can just do something so simple with the mind. And you don't have to kind of go off and plan and think and do other things that your mind does.

It's also a powerful teacher. Because the breath is so simple. Breathing is so simple, compared to a lot of things we could do. Simplicity is one of the best teachers because you'll see all that it's easy, easier to see the forces of the mind getting distracted and where it's caught up in and what it wants to do. If you have a reference point. And so you have the reference point of the breathing, you've tried to be with a breath and you see so People are amazed. They had no idea their mind was out of control until they have the reference point, stable steady reference point of breathing. And then you get to see all the beliefs and momentum and feelings and that kind of pull you off, scatter you off from the breath. And you'll learn from that you see that you get to know it well. And as you get to know it, that better and better, it becomes easier to come back. So also the tradition talks about the more of more you can be with your breathing, just being with simple with your breath, your attention is going into the breathing. And because that's where your energy of attention is going, you're starving, your distractions, the hidden tendency of the mind to be creative lost and preoccupations and all the concerns you have. That the is fueled by your energy of your attention. If you focus on it, you reinforce it. If you take your energy away from it, your attention away from it, they say it's the start the kind of withers away or quiets down. So just just a simple act of coming back and getting to know your breath, staying with your breath is a radical thing to do. And some people will do just that for years to great benefits. You don't have to do much more. However, this discourse goes on, and does more. And I'll kind of do it very kind of very broadly. So I don't bore you with 16 steps. We're just kind of the idea, a general idea. That then you try to get to know the better the breath better and better. And at some point, as you get to know the bath better, you stay with a breath of the center, but you become aware of what's called in text, your bodily formations, the technical term in Buddhism, and the bodily formations are is that part of your physical experience, which you can feel in your body that's there because of what What your mind has done. So the effect your mind has on your body. So how his body has been formed or shaped by the activities your mind so if you go around all day being tense in your shoulders, you sit down to meditate, and you feel that tension in your shoulders you feel the shoulders up. That's if that's called a formation that's been shaped by what your mind has been doing being 10 solidly worried. Or if you're scared, and you feel tightness in your belly, or if you're angry all the time and your your jaws are clenched, then the tension there is it comes that experience of tension there is what's called a formation because it's formed or shaped by what the mind has done. And so it turns out that a lot of what we call our physical or experience of our body is been influenced shaped by what our mind does. And even Abraham Lincoln do this who apparently said something like, by the time a person's 40 years old, he She is responsible for their face.

And, you know, it's interesting to see you know, faces in different cultures. And maybe because they speak different languages use different muscles, different expressions, you can see that actually the shape of the face gets shaped slightly differently by, you know, how it's used and what goes into it. And

you see it sometimes in people's deep furrows, you know, you know, or different expressions they can hang out locked in at some point or posture, sometimes people's postures get locked in from some way of holding all the time. So, this is called the physical or bodily formation. So then instruction about that is your breathing, and you pay attention to that get to know it, and then you relax it. The instruction is relaxed. So this is now the instruction is not just to watch and see. The destruction is to soften to relax, to relax. Your body. So relax your shoulders, relax, like your stomach, relax, with your face, relax. Whatever way you can soften your body that's easy to do, you soften your relax. So in the beginning, you just get to know it, no change at all. But now you're instructed to do make a change, which is to relax. And it's remarkable how many meditators don't relax. There's plenty of meditators who take on meditation as if it's a really serious thing. And if, you know real serious, you got to you got to kind of tighten up and burn down and try so hard. And especially on retreats and meditation retreats, where you know, in, in daily life, you know, he's mostly raw already so tense, it doesn't take you know, mostly we're relaxing, but on retreat, you know, then people get so serious. And so it's good to be encouraged to relax. Anyway, it's a beautiful thing to relax. It's a wonderful thing. You have to be a little bit careful. And if you're really tired, and you focus on relaxing, it might put you to sleep, so that you have to kind of watch and adjust accordingly. But the instruction is actually Buddha said, relax your body and the relaxation be quite deep. In fact, when you go on retreat, there's a deep, deep, deep relaxation that goes on that it's kind of like the bodywork that goes on. People's physical body changes in very deep ways. When there's a long period of time in silence, where the usual habits of the body are not being reinforced, when we're feeling and being present for what goes on deeply in our body. There's kind of an unwinding unraveling of many of the ways that were held. And people often refer to as deep bodywork to be there. So then the instruction is goes on to just then experience so as you relax, as you relax your body, there's kind of an energy that gets released or a feeling tone that gets released. I don't know if you've ever felt that If you hold your clench your fists really, really tight, and then let go, you feel the relief, you feel kind of this openness or this lightness that comes on. So the same thing with your body, if you start releasing relaxing your body, it releases kind of a lightness or openness. Or another thing that happens when you hold yourself tense all the time, the body is much more solid feeling to the body. And the body tends to have much sharper boundaries. Like this is I'm here, this is it. And often it's kind of brittle, tighter we are, the more brittle we are. As we relax, the sense of solidity and sense of firm boundaries to the body begins to dissolve and relax and is much more feeling the body being open and porous. Maybe sometimes even transparent. Sometimes with your eyes closed. There's actually a feeling that there's no boundaries to the body. There's you know, it's kind of just, you know, just kind of the edges of your body is kind of soft, and kind of the extend out beyond the real edges of your body is kind of the feeling. So there's a change that begins happening in your body. And generally as you get focused and concentrated on the breath, and you're relaxing the body, that the effect that it has, is that brings about joy, or westerns or well being or happiness. And then the instructions out here are, let yourself feel or experience that happiness that well being. Feel that goodness. And some people don't do that meditation. There's occasionally some people who feel that maybe they're not supposed to be attached to feeling good, feeling joy, and so they don't deserve better not go there. But in fact, instructions are feeling, feel the joy feel the well being that comes up from this deeper process of getting concentrated and relaxing in your body.

Then the instruction is to do the same thing with what's called the mental formations. So first you kind of get to know what goes on in the mind instruction just know your mind. Know your mental formations, and then relax it, that the mental formations are the, the effect on the mind of how you use the mind. So, the mind So, if you're tense, you know you're, you know, your shoulders might get tense, but so does your mind. You feel the mind getting contracted and tight, or narrow or dark. Or if you're caught up in your thoughts completely preoccupied in your thoughts and kind of try to pay attention to what that's like. Compared to being relaxed in your thoughts. People often report that things get very close,

claustrophobic tight, dark events, maybe first just like they're gonna get darkens because you kind of lost in your thought. It can feel uncomfortable, it can feel like pressure. It's a variety of things that can feel to be caught up. There's can be a lot of energy involved in your mental activity. And you can feel how that energy coursing through your body coursing through your brain coursing through your mind. And so here, you start feeling what goes on the mind, and then you're starting to relax it. Now, this is particularly useful if you if you have a lot of thinking going on if you're thinking a lot in meditation. Thinking itself is a mental formation. And it's, it's it's thinking itself as a mental formation, but it's fueled by other mental formations. So for example, if there's a lot of incessant thinking, chances are is that there's a lot of pressure or attention to think. And you can feel that pressure or attention. or there might be strong emotions that are connected to it by people who plan a lot will often worry. And so the worry is kind of like a fuel that keeps us planning and planning because we're worried. We're trying to Pick something or make ourselves safe. And so it's possible to kind of look at the phenomena of thinking, see the mental activity that's going on, and then relax. And it's a beautiful thing to begin softening, relaxing, calming the mind. I kind of think when I, when I calm the mental activity, it's kind of like the brain spreads out. Rather than being a big big lump. It kind of spreads flattens out like the surface of beautiful still Lake becomes really wide. And, you know, the sense of boundaries, again, for the mind is pretty diffuse as well. Pretty open. Where's your mind? You know, usually you don't even know. And, within within when the mind is getting relaxed and soft, it starts feeling very, very open and it's a beautiful feeling to have the mind open. And then in the early texts, they talk about this very open mind sometimes and describe it as a, as an expansive mind. Or in zen, they sometimes called Big mind, the mind was very, very expensive. So expensive. It mean logically doesn't make sense this way, but this experiential sense. So imagine you're hearing a sound 50 feet away or something. So you kind of recognize as far away but if the mind is very, very relaxed and soft, it's almost as if the mind what is a mind after all mindset, the brain awareness is as expand as extensive and reaches out as far as 50 feet or 50 yards away with that sound is it feels like it's broad and big. And the sounds happened within this big awareness. It's, you know, it's you don't have to feel this way. But this is often the consequence of being relaxed, very soft. So part of the instructions first instruction is notice the mental activity is going on. Notice the mental formations, not just the thoughts, but all the other things going on. Then the next instruction is relax it. If you try too hard, it doesn't work. You don't want to have a high standard you're measuring yourself against just a little bit of softening. Maybe little little, teeny steps. Maybe every time you breathe out, you can remember to let go with your thinking. Every time you breathe out, maybe you soften maybe rather than relaxing, but you can't you soften around it, you feel it's okay. Almost like you say it's okay. And you soften a little bit soften.

And so you begin relaxing the mind, softening the mind, first the body, and then the mental activity. As the mental activity softens or relaxes, it becomes quieter to becomes less activity. And as it becomes less, the mind feels lighter or open. Some people still say this work Already, it has more Sunday billing to talk about being aluminous and also tends to feel more stable. So, the next instruction is to get to know the overall state of your mind the mind state, not the particular activities, but how you feel when your mind starts getting expensive or open or soft or relaxed. A soft mind a concentrated mind is a soft mind. Some people don't know that and they pare down they try to try so hard to get concentrated. But in in Buddhism, the concentrated mind is comes out of being soft and happy. And so then you relax. And then you kind of open up you're aware of this mind, you're aware of this expansive mind, just aware of it as it is the soft mind, get to know it. And that gives you a very interesting reference point. To understand something, when the mind is soft, relax that ease, open, expansive, luminous light. And those are kind of big words but even hints of that just a little bit. It's possible to watch what happens in the mind in the body. When you tighten up, when you get caught up in some concern. You come out of meditation, you're feeling a little calmer and more relaxed and open. And you walk and you turn on your computer. And it doesn't work that day. And your whole life is you know, your whole life in the computer.

So, you know, this is serious. And so you can sit you can watch the mind you have contracted and concerned and all the activities and you've lost that openness. By being latching on, that's maybe a dramatic or it could be a small thing. It could be that you had in mind to put on a certain shirt. And you hadn't realized that it was still in the hamper and hadn't been washed. And so you coat to blue shirt and you see, you know, it's a small thing, you have other shirts, but then you feel how you get kind of tight, because you have the wrong shirt to wear. And so by having but if you were really tense to begin with, running around, tense, frantic trying to take care of all thing, and you realize it was the wrong shirt, the shirt wasn't clean. You wouldn't notice that you tensed up even more because there's no yours super tense anyway. But if you're really relaxed, you can see how this operates. And part of the value of the relaxation and meditation is to begin watching what the mind does. The point of it isn't so much that you want to keep going deeper and deeper and deeper. But rather at some point you want to be deeper. Enough common enough, that you can watch how you come out what you do, how you get caught. So you can begin understanding what you do really well. What your tendencies are, when you're caught up misses your fears and worries and how your mind operates, and how you can work with it in a wise way, how maybe you can go through your life taking care of what needs to be taken care of, without tightening up, grasping, resisting, what's going to take care of any speaking and taking care of being relaxed. And that way you will learn that is to is, is there's no key the best key I know best secret I know is to watch and learn how you tense up and how once you a little bit tense, you can relax again. And you'll learn about and thanks a lot, so long study. And so coming out of meditation is a very important place to study yourself and get to know what happens. But as this instruction continues, it isn't just a matter of so then as you as you get better and better at this, then the instruction is to liberate the mind.

So once you understand that open, open mind can be come, then you do what it takes to begin letting go when you can let go into that more open mind, like go into that more relaxed mind, like go into that more clarity of mind, that's there. begin practicing letting go. And it has a beautiful term, it's called liberate the mind. So, it has a more lofty kind of nice Association, just letting go. But letting go. Some people don't like the idea of letting go hear these Buddhists depriving us again. But letting go is a beautiful thing because it's not so much what you let go of which you have to let go of something, but rather what you can let go into. And so we're letting go into peace. We're letting go letting go into a greater intimacy with ourselves, then go into a greater presence letting go into being more relaxed. And it's we gain something we let go of the clinging and the tightness of the mind. We don't lose. It's not about deprivation, it's actually about gain. So this process of first getting to know the breath, the body, relaxing the body, getting to the mental activity, relaxing the mental activity, getting to know the mind, state, the overall state of consciousness and learning to liberate it to keep more open, or is the two thirds three quarters of this process of these 16 steps. It goes between just knowing something and doing something. And if you're at work, very important, be wise, back and forth. Because some people are really good at fix it mind. And these go in there and Tinker and manipulate engineer their way and they're just It's just another way of being tense and caught up. And it's really wise to, to not try to do too much. But just get to know the mind, get to know the breath. Just try to you know, put aside the thickset mind engineering mind the doing mind, grasping mind, the searching mind, mind is trying to make something happened and relax just with just with what's happening here. And when you have some ability to do that, then it's actually much more effective to do something to relax, to do that to begin softening, softening. The relaxing of the mind, the relaxing of the body is a wonderful protection for meditation practice, so that your meditation practice itself doesn't become tense, which is possible to do especially if you go on retreat you're doing all the time. And, and I've as a teacher, I know sometimes it's hard for people to learn to properly relax What happens on retreat is often our deeper deeper Habits of Mind kick in with greater strength. And so or they become or that maybe they'll kick in stronger, but they get highlighted they stand out in the relief. And so you start seeing that you're always adjusting and manipulating or changing always afraid always trying to get something to happen always judging,

always doing something and it can be so built into you know, who we think we are that we never question it. We never question the discursive thinking or some of the thinking because it's so obvious. This is what we you know, So familiar. But when you use let relaxing as a reference point, it's Are you feeling your way into something you can feel it here in the present moment, you relax into your body relax into your mind. It's very hard to keep going some of these old tendencies because Cause they require attention. Did you hold them a little bit, to relax, relax. And it's beautiful to use relaxation as a path or a softening, calming. So all along all these steps that I've been describing, all along, the person is staying with a breath. Breathing in breathing out continuous breathing with the body breathing with the experience of mental activity breathing with the mental state. It's like breathing is like the, the, like the anchor that keeps us in the present moment. It's the reference point that keeps us centered. It's like the center of it's like a ballast of the boat that keeps the boat from tipping over. And so the training is to stay with your breath and costuming and breath but you're not only focusing on the breath, there's an open, you're open, you're kind of tracking what else is going on in the present moment. So you can also pay attention to your, your body, your mental activity, your mind, state, and attend to it in a proper way.

And then as this grows deeper and deeper, at some point, it opens up to the last quarter last four of the 16 stages. And that is to cultivate insight to see more clearly what's going on. And with the insight practice, we start seeing that the primary things we're seeing the things that we cling to, in our life, are not so interesting to cling to. They might be interesting for other reasons, for the purposes, but not for the purpose of grasping and it's very hard to educate the mind that To teach the mind to become disinterested in clinging. And so once you've done all these different steps and gotten really good state of mind relaxed and open, and you put yourself in a very good situation to begin looking at the things that you cling to, and realize and see, you know, I don't think I need to do this anymore. I don't need to hold on to this anymore. And then it's not so easy to let go of the deepest clinging we have. So the description that happens next is that the things we cling to start to fade away, the clinging begins to fade. Sounds like you find this on and off switch suddenly you stop clinging. But, but you as you get less interested. It begins fading away, fading away fading away until this wonderful moment happens. Or time happens with whatever clinging that you've been living with for a while. You recognize Now it's gone, it ceased, it's gone. And that's a beautiful thing. Because then the heart, the mind is unbounded, the heart mind is set free, is open, luminous, clear, to beautiful thing, the free heart. And so to do the work of freeing the heart is one of the most beautiful things a human being can do. So that's what they're doing these two weeks, that the retreats and there have all kinds of adventures in the process. So I hope that maybe maybe in giving this talk, I gave you a little flavor of the retreat. We have about five minutes if anyone would like to ask a question about that or clarity and anything on behalf or anything else.

I just have a question about

is this like a like a lifetime process are you talking about? You're trying to do this every meditation system?

Oh, that's okay. Some people will go through all 16 stage steps in a meditation session. But I think it could also be like on the retreat, we're doing like once one step a day, you know, do it slowly. And, and, you know, as I said in the beginning, you can spend a lifetime just on step one. Just coming back and being with your breath, it's quite powerful. So sometimes it's really good to get really good or get really stabilized in some of in a stage one of these steps before you move on too quickly. And so it might take a year for someone to go through these because you want to just kind of really get to know each one well

So I just have a comment.

Which is, it's interesting to me that this alternation between just noticing and then relaxing, because I'm a piano player. And, and so relaxing has been really important in learning to play the piano well. And at some point in the last few years, I finally realized that the best way of trying to relax was to just notice where the tension was. And so I would, I would kind of slow down and play slower and slower until I could actually feel where the tension was. And then actually, I didn't even feel that I had to relax it. It just happened naturally. It's a

beautiful it's a beautiful thing when when just a knowing something really well, it lets go by itself. And sooner at some point. That's a really important lesson. So we don't always take in response. instability. The idea that it's all up to us we have to do something itself is a kind of clinging. And so as sooner or later, it's good to learn that we don't have to always be the one in charge.

Okay, so I hope that made some sense to you. And I hope that those of you who are interested will fall in love with your breathing. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful thing to practice with your breath. And I've been focusing on my breathing like this for, you know, for my whole adult life. And the more I do it, the more I love it. Thank you